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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION ELECTS CONSENSUS CANDIDATES IN TACHIRA
STATE -- BUT VICTORY UNCERTAIN

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary: The Christian Democratic Party of Venezuela (Copei) won a decisive victory in the September 28 opposition primary in the western state of Tachira to determine the consensus candidates for the November 23 state and local elections. The opposition now claims that it has 20 consensus candidates out of 22 gubernatorial candidates. Nevertheless, the opposition mayor of San Cristobal continues to contest the Comptroller's decision to declare him ineligible to run and said he will stay in the Tachira gubernatorial race if he wins timely judicial relief. Tachira is one of several gubernatorial races that local pundits believe the opposition could win, but only if opposition parties stick to a single candidate and mobilize far more voters than it did for its primary. End Summary.

12. (C) The National Electoral Council (CNE) conducted a September 28 primary for the opposition in Tachira State, a potential opposition stronghold on the border with Colombia. CNE Vice President Janeth Hernandez presided over the primary, which was open to all eligible voters in Tachira. Just as it did with Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), the CNE conducted the primary on a reimbursable basis. Enrique Marquez, an electoral expert with Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT), told poloff September 25 that the CNE charged the participating opposition parties less than its costs for running the election. He speculated that the CNE is trying to bolster its credibility with opposition parties.

COPEI CANDIDATE THE VICTOR?

13. (C) COPEI gubernatorial candidate Cesar Perez Vivas won over 44 percent of the vote in Tachira state, about 35,000 of the 81,000 votes cast. Gabino Paz, a former Copeyano who ran with Red Flag (Bandera Roja) support, came in second with over 23 percent and the next two contenders received 18 (Gustavo Azocar of UNT) and 10 percent each. Monica Mendez, the wife of the mayor of San Cristobal, won the mayoral primary for San Cristobal, the capital of Tachira State, with over 50 percent of the vote. Her husband William Mendez is in his second term as mayor of San Cristobal and ineligible to run again. Approximately 10 percent of the state's eligible voting population came out to cast a ballot in the primary. The opposition will need to mobilize far more voters if it expects to win the governorship in November.

Tachira Governor Ronald Blanco La Cruz won in 2004 by securing 169,000 of the 295,000 overall valid votes cast. Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela also held primaries in Tachira and were able to generate a far greater voter turnout, indicating that they may be able to mobilize the votes necessary to defeat the opposition candidate in November.

14. (C) San Cristobal Mayor William Mendez was the leading opposition contender for the gubernatorial race, according to public opinion polls, but the Comptroller General declared him ineligible to run based on administrative sanctions. Despite Perez Vivas' strong win, Mendez has nevertheless refused to bow out of the race. He told the press on September 28 that "I continue to be first in the polls" and pledged to continue to fight his disqualification before the Supreme Court, which has yet to issue its decision on his individual appeal. Mendez challenged Perez Vivas to yet another internal contest, should the judiciary reinstate his eligibility. His wife Monica, however, held a joint press conference with Perez Vivas on September 29 to discuss their plans for the state and opposition unity, suggesting that William Mendez could be swayed to fall into line behind Perez Vivas.

COMMENT

15. (C) Tachira and Aragua are the only two states in which the opposition has held primaries to determine their consensus candidates. Tachira is also one of several states that local pundits believe the opposition could win. In both cases, the primaries are likely to give the winners greater legitimacy and an electoral boost. However, similar primaries by the PSUV had far greater participation. With

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nearly twice as many votes as the runner-up, Perez Vivas could be a strong candidate to run under the opposition's banner. Mendez's public fight to the bitter end, however, highlights the damaging lack of unity among the opposition and the refusal of many of its members to put the defeat of Chavista candidates before personal ambition.

CAULFIELD